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When the Ego Meets Buddhism

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by

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When the Ego Meets Buddhism

"Am I now as happy as I should be?" (nagging question of an ego just coming out from a successful psycho-analytic treatment.)



he Buddha is supposed to have epitomised his teaching in the following short phrase: "Suffering and the cessation of suffering."

A very succinct statement which becomes more analytical if expanded into four propositions, the Four Noble Truths: (1) life is suffering; (2) suffering originates in craving; (3) the cessation of craving brings about the cessation of suffering; (4) there is a way leading to that.

That there is suffering in life, nobody would deny. More difficult to understand is that life is suffering; suffering in its various manifestations, physical and mental. Not only are decay, disease, sorrow, lamentation, death, the presence of what one dislikes, the separation from what one likes suffering, but so also are getting what one wants, having one's desires fulfilled (a situation usually very much looked for, and called "happiness"). This sounds paradoxical to the

worldling, the ordinary man who sees the world as full of lasting things that he (another supposedly lasting entity called ego) can possess, control, enjoy or get rid of. Surrounded by "solid" and "durable" things, and having the idea of being "solid" and "durable" himself, man is greedy or has aversion.

Buddhism, however, denies that there are such entities so characterised; they are—Buddhism claims—only illusions, hallucinations that appear as real because wrong attention is applied to them. And when a mirage is longed for, frustrations and disappointments result.

Suffering, therefore, has at its basis three (evil) roots: wrong understanding (ignorance), greed (craving), and aversion (hatred). These three roots influence each other and go into the making of what is usually called a worldling, a man, an ego, an "I".

Buddhism does not ask for belief in what it asserts; it offers ways and means to experience the truths it proclaims. And the Fourth Noble Truth—the Eightfold Path—provides for that; it is a path to be trodden, not only to be known. The eight steps are: understanding, thinking, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, concentration. Each one of them must be right: right understanding, right thinking and so on. In this little word right, which in this case means

appropriate, skilful, adequate, resides the importance of the matter.

The Eightfold Path is the way conducive to the elimination of the three evil roots, and their substitution with their contraries: right understanding of reality, absence of greed (including generosity), absence of aversion (including compassion and loving kindness). As in the case of the three evil roots, the three good ones, which work at the eradication of suffering, influence one another. So, once reality is seen as it is, greed and aversion lose their grip. Right understanding—wisdom—may generate compassion and loving kindness. Understanding oneself is the necessary basis to understanding others, and without understanding, compassion and love are poor indeed.

But what, more precisely, is right understanding? It is seeing reality as it is; and reality as it is, is the contrary of what it appears to be to the common man. "Real" reality is impermanent, unsatisfactory and devoid of self. To see reality as impermanent is to see that it arises to fall away immediately. What is impermanent is also unsatisfactory. Besides, the impermanence alluded to is a total one; it is not some sort of fluctuation leaving untouched a hard core, an entity that lasts. This is tantamount to saying that there is no durable substance, no self, including of course, that self which is called ourself. There being no

self, there is nothing that can be called “mine” and that is completely under control.

But if reality is impermanent, unsatisfactory and devoid of self, what does it consist of? The Buddhist answer is: it consists of events or phenomena, physical phenomena and mental ones, matter and mind. If the mental phenomena are subdivided into four groups, we have the following five-fold classification: matter, feelings, perceptions, volitions and consciousness—five headings that Theravada Buddhism calls the ultimate reality. These five groups are aggregates because each one of them is composed of many items.

Another characteristic of that reality is that it is conditioned reality (in contra-distinction to Nibbāna, which is unconditioned reality); reality does not arise haphazardly, but by conditions, according to connections.

It is important to understand clearly what this means.

Conditionality is not causality. A cause leads necessarily to its effect. A condition may be necessary but not sufficient. Causality implies that if something exists, something else must follow. Conditionality states that if something exists, something else must have existed before or must exist now. Causality moves from present to future in a deterministic way.

Conditionality is not deterministic and implies that nothing arises from a single cause, or arises singly.

Conditionality is not equivalent to multiple causes so that an event may be pre-determined with certainty once all the operative causes are known. No, when conditionality dominates, reality can be influenced. But there is always an unavoidable margin of uncertainty about what is going to happen. If it were not so, it would mean that events, phenomena, could be totally controlled, that events, phenomena, would be *selves*.

Buddhism has categorised twenty-four modes of conditionality.

Again, like impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and no-self, conditionality is not only food for the intellect. Conditionality must be experienced; it must be lived. We have plenty of opportunity for that, since everything is conditioned, is originated dependently and, in its turn, conditions something else.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of this principle of dependent origination, which finds one of its most important applications in the so called “wheel of life.” Every Buddhist knows the eleven propositions in this “wheel of life” and the twelve links joining them. In its usual interpretation implying time succession, it shows the three evil roots at work.

So, ignorance and craving or volition, in the preceding life, condition, in the present one, consciousness, resolving itself in mind-body which, articulated in six sense bases, contacts objects. Out of these contacts, feelings emerge. Feelings condition craving; craving conditions grasping, and grasping becoming (or evolving). At the end of the present life the impulse to become gives rise to a new birth, a new life, then consciousness, mind-body and so on. Suffering does not stop at death but goes on and on as long as the three roots are there.

Dependent origination may also be interpreted as occurring every moment of our existence. Since new situations always arise only to disappear very quickly, it is possible to say that we are born and we die every minute. Even if looked at from this angle, dependent origination is still spread in time, since it implies a succession of factors.

In its various interpretations, dependent origination is an illustration of The Four Noble Truths. The critical point where things may take a bad turn is when feelings make themselves felt. Then, the wrong view that there are lasting things, pleasant (thus enjoyable) or unpleasant (thus repulsive), manifests itself along with its two bad companions: greed or aversion.

Suffering, therefore, is dependently originated. But

it can equally dependently cease. In other words, it is possible that, at the critical point, reality is rightly viewed, and when right view (right understanding) supplants ignorance, the remaining evil roots, greed and aversion, although not automatically extinguished, are greatly undermined. Gradually they are diminished. Finally, with their disappearing, suffering too ceases for lack of its necessary conditions.

It remains to mention another important point: the law of *kamma*, according to which right action will have good effects and vice versa. The kammic relationship is just one of the twenty-four modes of conditionality hinted at above. What it really means is that intended actions based on wrong understanding, greed or aversion produce painful results, whereas intended actions based on right understanding, generosity, compassion and loving kindness produce good results.

The cultivation of good *kamma* is realised through the mundane (and therefore imperfect) practice of the Eightfold Path. It brings about improvement in future becoming; it may even be a prerequisite for totally cutting off becoming in the future.

Needless to say that whatever degree of right understanding is present in this mundane path, this is

not the supramundane right understanding that sees reality as it is. We are still within the ego preview; the ego with its will to last, with its desire for betterment. There is not yet the realisation that life is always unsatisfactory, that a poor man suffers as a poor man, that a rich man suffers as a rich man, that a son suffers as a son. There is no full realisation of the old saying:

“There is no doer of a deed
Or one who reaps the deed’s result.
Phenomena alone flow on.
No other view than this is right.”

Visuddhimagga XIX, 20

It is only the supramundane Eightfold Path that leads to the liberation from self and from desire. This is the path practised by the noble ones. At that stage there is no *kamma* or, if you like, only a functional *kamma*. *Kamma* has become dissociated from continuing birth and death, isolated from both good and bad actions, both rooted in ignorance although at a different level.

The world of the ego is the world of wrong views, the world of self (durable things, durable persons), of greed, craving, grasping, aversion, the world of “this is mine.” The ego lives in the first person—I live, (not phenomena). Living in the first person means having consciousness of being an I (as when we say or think

“I am doing this or that”) or simply acting as an I (that is with wrong views, greed and aversion even though the word, the concept, “I” is not clearly formulated).

One of the connotations of the ego is duration. The ego is a process of unification or identification imposed, decreed, on a series of differences connected by conditionally-dependent origination.

That those differences exist, the ego would certainly not deny; it would not deny that it changes from birth to death, but it would add that through changes it remains somehow the same. So the ego is neither totally the same nor totally different. It is different and the same. I look at my body or at my psychological behaviour or both, and I say: “I have changed.” The present situation is different (sometimes very different) from the preceding one, but there is an ego now which, mysteriously, existed also then.

The ego is not only convinced of its changes, but also wants to provoke them by resorting to aestheticians, medical doctors, psychoanalysts and the like. But the willingness of the ego to change itself meets with strong resistance when the changes go so far as to make very difficult or impossible the process of unification or identification. When this is the case, the ego clings tenaciously to its old habits, its old patterns which, however unsatisfactory, give through

their repetition the supreme pleasure of an (illusionary) stability. The fear of losing one's identity is the fear of death; so when the differences become too different and therefore not susceptible to unification, the process of modification (even if it is for the better) is resisted.

This process of unification is, of course, sustained by memory. Memory of the past recognised as "my past," as well as that kind of forward memory which is the process of projecting oneself into the future.

We have seen that the ego craves. It craves for sensual pleasure. But there are other forms of craving and they concern the after-death. "Shall I continue to exist after my death?" "Shall I not?" Two extreme views can be alternatively held: "There is an eternal substance, a soul in me which is immortal" (eternalism); or "There is no such element and everything ends at death" (annihilationism). These views are the reflection of desires, hopes or fears. Too much suffering can be conducive to hope for a better life after death, or for a total extinction.

The craving to last may also manifest itself in other ways, for instance, through identification with descendants (they will bear the same name), or with ideas or social systems, and so on. Hence the thought: "I shall die but, in a way, I will live through my

children, or my ideal will live, or my country.”

It is easy to see that the boundaries of the ego are very vague; they depend on memory, on imagination, on the grasping power of what is considered as mine.

As is well known, in this field Buddhism teaches rebirth. Its basic principle is that craving, through grasping, conditions becoming (evolving), going on living. By the way, even the desire not to live would have the same result, because what counts is not the contents of desire, but the desire itself, acting as a kind of fuel keeping the wheel going.

Buddhism claims that rebirth takes place not only during one’s life, every second of it, but also, so to speak, between lives. The two points—birth and death—mark no beginning and no end in this respect; rebirth passes through them without stopping. After death, rebirth can take place in one of the thirty-one planes of existence, some higher, some lower than the human plane, according to the effects of good or bad *kamma*. These thirty-one planes constitute the frame, the static universe within which the impermanent, unsatisfactory, selfless, conditioned reality moves towards the better or the worse. Included are those who have a fixed destiny (*niyata-puggala*); either they cannot be saved now (having committed one of the five infernal acts with immediate results) or,

conversely, they are on the way of enlightenment without possibility of relapsing.

What is there to say about this cosmology which I have summarised only to a very limited extent?

Many-floor universes, with paradise above and hell below sometimes described with precise details, are frequent in religious doctrines. Buddhism is no exception in this respect. But Buddhism is an exception when it is considered as a religion, and stands in a class of its own, to the point that the term religion may not be thought appropriate for it. Buddhism is based on experience; it is a try-for-yourself matter. Theism is foreign to it. It is pragmatic in its very essence: "suffering and the cessation of suffering." It is emphatically not a closely knit system of concepts. It mistrusts intellectual constructions. It is perhaps unique in advising to throw away the teaching once it has served its purpose, once it has become a way of living, which is what Buddhism really is.

And yet Buddhism has its cosmology, its metaphysic, its scholasticism, its Talmud. The planes of existence are thirty-one, no more, no less. Strange planes populated by strange beings depicted with abundance of details. Next to the hell full of horrors, there is the plane of the animals, and next to the latter,

the one inhabited by *petas*, having a very big belly and a tiny mouth, so that they can never satisfy their appetite ... and so on and so forth.

Besides, if we consider the other part of Buddhism, that concerned with everyday reality, we have to notice that while on one hand, Buddhism repeats time and again that this is a matter to be experienced, to be lived, on the other hand thousands and thousands of pages have been filled up to explain or to criticise in the most subtle and intellectualistic way, the characteristics of this reality, the mutual consistency of its attribute, how it is possible (or impossible) that a reality which arises and dies every moment, may influence (through the law of *kamma*) other realities in the future, and similar subjects.

So, apart from the validity of the exposition of the Dhamma and that of any technique using talk with the immediate purpose of defeating rationality, a strong tendency exists in Buddhism to indulge both in metaphysics and in argumentation for their own sake.

It is the same sort of incongruity noticeable in a man who says: "I am against talking" and instead of stopping at that, enters into a long discussion to demonstrate his point of view!

The fact is that anything concerning beyond death is in great demand. People want to know, to be told

about it. And it is very difficult to resist the temptation to give explanations; hence, the Buddhist cosmology or mythology, which is the frame within which rebirth occurs.

And the ego (to revert to it) is very excited about that. The ego of course sees and interprets rebirth through wrong view, greed and aversion. So, it gets hold of rebirth, takes possession of rebirth which becomes its rebirth. But the ego lives more in the future or in the past than it does in the present; therefore it neglects the very important aspect of rebirth, which consists in the rising and falling of phenomena at every moment, and centres its attention in what may happen after its death. So rebirth becomes a way to extend the grasping power of the ego, an exacerbation of the ego itself, supported by that egocentric interpretation of *kamma* law hinted at above.

In this context, the ego, being an attribution of unity and identity to a series of connected phenomena, may even recognise itself as belonging to the same series of past lives; the process of unification and identification so inherent to an ego, may reach back beyond birth. That is less astonishing than it may appear at first. If I can look at a photo of sixty years ago and say: "This is me," I could perhaps say the same looking at a photo of 1860. (But, of course, very few egos have such a

large range of grasping power).

In this way rebirth becomes a view cherished or feared according to the case. The ego may hope to enjoy future lives or may fear them; the entity that now hopes or fears is supposed to be the same entity that will then enjoy or suffer. In all this, we see the whole structure of the ego at work; wrong view, greed and aversion capture rebirth in their net.

In so doing, the ego does not realise that those hopes and fears too are dependently originated, are phenomena, impermanent, unsatisfactory, devoid of self; they arise and fall away. The ego does not realise that it is a fictitious entity, that it is nothing else than a manifestation of dependent origination.

The ego believes it has many problems. In reality it has only the problem of being an ego. The ego thinks, hopes, fears about the future, about rebirth because it is an ego. It does not live the dependent origination; it does not experience the dependent origination but only thinks of it (when it does). If experienced, the dependent origination is not different from rebirth, being another name for it, another way to express the conditionality of phenomena.

King Milinda—who must have had a bent for getting down to brass tacks—asked the Venerable Nāgasena the celebrated question whether the being

who dies is the same or different from the being who is reborn. And he got the no less celebrated answer: "Neither the same nor another." Similarly it has been said that "not from itself, nor from something else, nor from a combination of both, nor by chance does an entity spring up." Again, it has been said that the world neither exists, nor does it not exist. "He who with right insight sees the arising of the world as it really is, does not hold with the non-existence of the world, and he who, with right insight, sees the passing away of the world as it really is, does not hold with the existence of the world." [1]

All these statements are meant to impress that our categories are inadequate to explain condition-dependent origination, which the more it is approached through them, the more it is elusive, but the more it is approached in awareness the more it is understood.

When conditionality is seen in an intuitive vision, in awareness, when the three evil roots are—at least temporarily—in abeyance, our problems about rebirth disappear. The Venerable Nāgasena, instead of answering "Neither the same nor another," might have said, perhaps more enigmatically, "As long as the question is asked, there is no answer to it."

"Now what, bhikkhus, are dependently arisen

phenomena?

“Ageing-and-death, bhikkhus, is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen; of a nature to decay, pass away, to be destroyed and to cease.

“Birth ... Becoming... Grasping ... Ignorance, bhikkhus, is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen; of a nature to decay, pass away, to be destroyed and to cease.

“These, bhikkhus, are called dependently arisen phenomena. When a noble disciple has well seen this dependent arising and those dependently arisen phenomena according to actuality with perfect wisdom, it does not occur to him that he should run back to the past, saying: ‘Did I exist in the past? Did I not exist in the past? What was I in the past? What was I like in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past?’

“Nor that he should run ahead to the future, saying: ‘Shall I exist in the future? Shall I not exist in the future? What shall I be in the future? What shall I be like in the future? Being what, what shall I become in the future?’

“Nor that he should now in the present have doubts within himself, saying: ‘Am I? Am I

not? What am I like? This being (that is myself), where did it come from? Where will it go to?’

“What is the reason? It is because the noble disciple has well seen this dependent arising and these dependently arisen phenomena according to actuality with perfect wisdom. [2]”

Indeed, he who understands the principle of the dependent origination, understands the Dhamma, as the Buddha is supposed to have said.

When a worldlying approaches Buddhism he does so with wrong views, greed and aversion, that is, with what a worldlying is. And that, of course, creates equivocation and misunderstanding.

The ego may take Buddhism for a kind of relaxation —“Half an hour of it before breakfast and you will feel fine for the rest of the day,” which is in keeping with the sort of stimulation man is exposed to nowadays: “Be compassionate; compassion reduces excess blood pressure and activates the liver functions.”

Or the ego may follow Buddhist instructions as if it were a question of becoming, for instance, a good accountant; that is, with one eye on the means and the other on the aim. “Do I fare well along the way to becoming a non-I?” So the ego desires, tries, hopes,

checks results, feels frustrated when things go badly: “Yesterday was much better,” and so on. Eventually the worldling realises that the ego cannot kill the ego; that the ego cannot strive for enlightenment, let alone its own (impossible) enlightenment. And yet, paradoxically enough, the ego finds that it has to learn the truth of the statement in the Dhammapada: “By the self train the self.”

Fortunately, the ego is not in charge all the time. As with everything else, it is impermanent, and it is in the moment of its absence that Buddhism has—so to speak—free access. In those moments, which may be very brief, especially at the beginning, there is no trying, no striving for something; there is, in a word, right effort. There is no departure and no arrival because the two coincide; there are no means and no ends, because the means is the end and vice versa; the path is the aim.

The ego has attempted and has failed. Perhaps this was inevitable because one starts with what one is, and at the beginning there is the ego, in the sense that in the beginning it is the ego that meets Buddhism.

But the time lost by the ego is not lost if it has been induced to realise how the ego works, what it is, and above all its basic, constitutional inability to go beyond itself.

Notes

1. Kaccāyana Sutta, S II 17 [\[Back\]](#)
2. Saṃyutta Nikāya, Nidānavagga. SN 12:20.
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